

Land Use in a Rural County

In February, 1979, Ellen Rocco interviewed Richard Grover, Land-Use Planner for St. Lawrence County, N.Y. Mr. Grover has been with the county since 1971 and has been praised by members of the New York State government as being one of the best planners in the entire state. In 1978, the completed St. Lawrence County Comprehensive Land-Use Plan was approved by the county legislature.

We had Mr. Grover read Gary Snyder's essay, 'Re-inhabitation,' so that this interview could be geared to relating Snyder's concepts to the Land-Use Plan and to rural New York in general.

Ellen Rocco: Richard, you've read Snyder's essay in which he discusses the concept of re-inhabitation -- or seriousness about place, about the place one lives in -- in relation to the region he lives in. The St. Lawrence County Comprehensive Land-Use Plan seems to reflect much of Snyder's philosophy of re-inhabitation. Could you elaborate on the design and intent of the Plan for this locality, this place.

Richard Grover: The County's Comprehensive Land-Use Plan is based on an examination of all of the resources that exist in this county: the human and natural resources. The sections of the report unfold as follows: population, natural resources, local economy, land use (the manner in which the county's economy is distributed across the land), housing, highways and transportation, community facilities and services (the improvements that humans have made upon the land), and community character which includes the county's history and culture. These sections form the introductory part of the plan.

By design, the planning process has attempted to develop a detailed picture of St. Lawrence County and then cast that in a state and regional framework. We are looking

at the county as a very particular region, here in *this place*: on an international border, on the northern slope of the Adirondacks, on part of one of the world's major rivers, as part of the St. Lawrence River watershed. The county is a very unique and diverse place; unique and diverse in that no other place in New York State, in New England, in Canada, or anywhere else is like it.

ER: Snyder's essay discusses uniqueness of place; every place has its own character. Yet we live in an age that does not really allow for local isolation. How has the Plan related our county's situation to the world around us?

RG: The Plan is based on the concept that St. Lawrence County's future, and the health and welfare of its people in the long term, ought to emerge from what we have here, what our communities represent, what our people are capable of, what our local needs are, and how we fit into the rest of the state. In one sense, the Plan looks very inward at the county and examines all of its resources, issues, problems and opportunities. On the other hand, it looks outward and tries to cast all of those things in a much broader context. Some things, local history, for example, don't relate too much to what's going on outside this area. Whereas other things are inextricable from the larger regions around us. For example, energy issues are directly related to what's going on outside the area, and on the nuclear power question we're talking in global terms. So, little, insignificant St. Lawrence County, tucked away in the northern Adirondacks, can be a very integral part of a global issue.

ER: The Land-Use Plan starts off with a commitment to the protection and enhancement of the county's diversity. That's another point made in the Snyder essay: that there is a recent trend, particularly in this country, to ignore di-

iversity. For example, the exploitation of a region like Pennsylvania for a particular resource, a region which has been devastated by coal-mining and the failure to maintain diversity. How can diversity be supported and maintained in this county? Can you give us some specific examples?

RG: The concept of diversity extends into all aspects of a community: ecological, visual, economic, social. And, diversity is what makes life on earth valuable and interesting and worthwhile.

An example would be the visual diversity of a town or a village, the thing that gives it a sense of place so that as a traveller, or as a resident, the place is different than any other place. The visual diversity of communities has been terrifically eroded away. That's brought about by the trend towards economic centralization: the same companies that are marketing products or developing communities here are doing the same thing elsewhere. One can go through Syracuse or Canton or Saranac Lake or Albany or Malone or Poughkeepsie and find the identical chain stores. The chain stores, in fact, try to capitalize on that in their advertising, 'You always feel at home at MacDonalds,' every town has a MacDonalds.

Sometimes we get involved in local zoning cases that deal with this sort of issue. I remember a few years ago some people in Canton felt slighted because Potsdam had a MacDonalds and Canton didn't. We now have a MacDonald's in Canton with a nautical theme, the front of MacDonald's has piers and nautical ropes. Obviously, in an inland community, it's a totally inappropriate visual intrusion that erodes away Canton's diversity. The park square in Canton enhances the town's diversity with its churches and historic blocks. But we don't have to rely totally on the historic aspects to give a place identity; contemporary modern architecture can do that just as well.

Every community has something special that should be supported and maintained, that helps its diversity. Potsdam sandstone is a local building material which will most probably never be mined again. One of the most hotly debated issues in Potsdam in the past few years has been the proposed demolition of the Potsdam Depot which is built out of that native sandstone. It is important to visual diversity as well as being a local landmark housing a thriving local business.

Unfortunately, most of our communities here have already done a great deal to destroy their own uniqueness. While Chambers of Commerce and government agencies pump money into tourism to boost the economy they, at the same time, support programs that demolish the local sense of identity, the sense of uniqueness that has been lost in the hometowns of people who might be likely to come here and tour the area. To me, there can be no attraction to anyone in Albany or in Syracuse or anywhere else to come to Northern New York to find more MacDonalds, more Pizza Huts, and so on.

Those developments may be inevitable, but they don't have to erode away the visual character of a community. There are examples, though not nearly enough, of communities that have taken a hard-line on visual diversity, visual character. They've set forth laws, and stick to them, that say, 'You want a MacDonalds, fine, build a MacDonalds, but it will fit in architecturally with our community.' The legal mechanisms are there but they're not exercised: you can regulate signs, you can regulate building materials, you can regulate the placement of buildings, you *can* do

those kinds of things. It's not done generally.

Energy supply should also be locally diversified: hydro-electric power and wood-fuel utilization. These are indigenous resources that have obvious value to the community allowing it to adjust economically, on a long-term, sustained basis, to energy shortages and rising energy costs. Centralized energy systems -- oil, natural gas, nuclear power -- erode away diversity, and local political control. In this case, visual character may not be the key problem but rather our economic lives and our political well-being in the sense that energy fuels are so vital to our day-to-day existence. And yet, we have allowed ourselves, like everyone else, to become dependent upon a handful of corporations and agencies.

ER: The Land-Use Plan deals with the entire picture, the diversity that's necessary on all levels, in all aspects of a place: you can't maintain diversity in one thing without maintaining diversity in everything. You can't maintain diversity in the landscape if commerce and agriculture become non-diversified. But *place* is first and foremost the land. Could you address yourself to the problems related to maintaining the character and diversity of the land itself?

RG: What you just said about the inter-relatedness of diversity is why that quality was set as the foundation of the Plan and why it permeates all of the Plan's components. So the Plan makes recommendations supporting agricultural diversity, small business and central business districts (over shopping malls on the outskirts of towns), revitalization of communities, in-fill development (rather than sprawl), housing rehabilitation (over new construction or mobil home development).

The reason for this kind of thinking is not for beauty alone but because it's the only possible salvation for the county's economy. This is a depressed area and it's becoming more depressed. The Plan suggests that the only way to turn this all about and make the area economically and socially viable is to make maximum use of what is here now.

In terms of the natural resource base of the community, the Plan strongly advocates recognizing the differences -- environmental, ecological -- in different sections of the county. It's a huge county with remarkable environmental diversity placed, as it is, between the St. Lawrence River and the Adirondack mountains. The physiography goes from mountainous regions, through foothills, into the river valley and contains farmlands, forestlands, wetlands, ridges and valleys, all interspersed with communities of varying sizes. The fact that the county has no central city, but only five urban centers and a number of rural centers, contributes to its diversity.

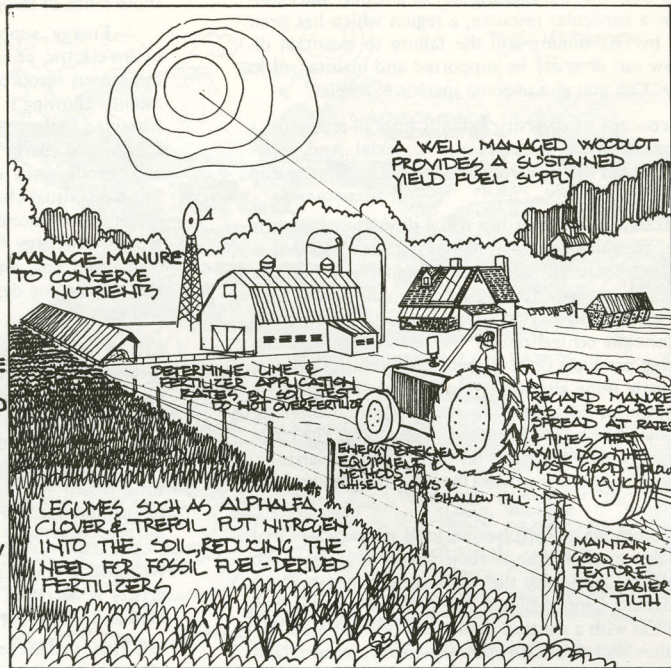
The Plan recognizes the physiographic differences and identifies the three distinct zones, so to speak, that run parallel to the St. Lawrence River: the St. Lawrence Valley, the Adirondack foothills, and the Adirondack mountain region. Then, going exactly across those areas are all the rivers of the county. And these rivers and watersheds are different from each other. For example, we have the Racquette River and Grasse River watersheds which both extend into the Adirondack region. You could say they're very similar and ought to be treated similarly. We don't see it that way. The Grasse River watershed, including its headwaters, lies entirely in St. Lawrence County. Close by, the Racquette

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River has a watershed with headwaters lying further south in Hamilton County, in the Blue Mountain Lake area. This county contains the intensely developed, fast water portion with 18 hydroelectric dams, of the Racquette (which is one of the state's larger rivers). This makes the Racquette very different than the Grasse with headwaters lying in an essentially wilderness area of this county. I think people may better understand why we opposed the Horizon Project in 1972 [a proposed, but defeated, second-home development project].

We looked at the topography, the physiography, the watersheds, the existing communities and population distribution, the economies and land-use patterns, and designed a plan that calls for the extreme of preservation on one hand (wilderness around the Grasse River headwaters), and the extreme of development on the other hand (along the Racquette). We must maintain our county's remarkable diversity with urban communities like Potsdam, Canton, Ogdensburg, Massena and Gouverneur (generally the same in size but very different in character), and at the extreme opposite with these wilderness areas.

ER: Snyder suggests that our cities are horribly over-populated while the rural areas have been dreadfully neglected and de-populated; that what's happened is that the rural areas are being raped to support the urban centers. The Land-Use Plan suggests that this county needs to discourage population moves from urban to rural regions, and to discourage population moves out of the county. What brought your planning board to those conclusions?

RG: What has happened here does not parallel the national trend of rural out-migration into the large urban centers -- in fact, it's just the opposite. Statistics for the decade from 1960-1970 show that all of our urban communities are losing population (permanent residents as opposed to tempor-

ary student populations). At the same time, the smaller towns have increased in population in the form of scattered rural settlement: buy a lot and build a home on it, frequently a mobil home. So we have a county-wide trend of the large towns losing and the rural areas gaining population.

ER: You're saying that our rural areas are becoming almost suburban, changing productive farmland into residential divisions which waste a local resource.

RG: I don't want anyone to confuse what we might call homesteading with what I call rural residential settlement. There's a difference. Buying an old farm and trying to put it back into some kind of productivity, on a full-time or part-time basis, is not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about good farmland, or even perhaps marginally productive brushland and woodland, being divided into 1/2-acre and acre lots.

This also has an impact on the urban area which loses its character as the center of social and community life, as the place for social interaction and economic exchanges. Urban communities lose their ability to provide that community contact when the business district is eroded away and replaced by commercial activities in shopping centers (creating an automobile-oriented society) and when you get people scattered all over the landscape. This latter trend means social contact must take place by telephone or commuting trips. In the rural areas, public service costs for the poor become prohibitive so transportation costs to whatever employment opportunities materialize are difficult to make: a rural poor population is difficult to service. You also create conflicts in agricultural districts where it is often inappropriate to have a lot of non-farm neighbors. And meanwhile, your communities are decaying and housing and commerce all become automobile-oriented.

ER: Kind of like making miniature inner cities out of our towns?

RG: Locally, this has not been a long-term trend. This is all something that has happened since I have been in St. Lawrence County. Urban renewal plans in Potsdam and in Ogdensburg, in my opinion, have been disasters to those communities. That continues today, we haven't learned from past mistakes.

ER: If you support urban center revitalization, then I assume the renewal efforts you refer to in Potsdam and Ogdensburg have undermined local diversity rather than promoted it?

RG: We don't really have to rely on my opinion of whether or not these projects are good or bad for the communities. The proof of the pudding is that they have been failures, they haven't drawn the line on how much commerce the communities can legitimately support based on the buying power there. The re-development hasn't taken place but it has created a community frenzy for development. And then any kind of development is supported just to try to turn something bad into something that maybe they'll at least break even on. So any developer comes along and right away people change the zoning and compromise on all kinds of principles just to see bricks and mortar going up. That's when you get further erosion of visual diversity and development that won't necessarily enhance your community because it may unnecessarily or unfairly compete with a part of your existing economic base -- again, for example, when shopping malls compete with downtown businesses. It's a very laissez-faire kind of development that in the end erodes away the local economy.

ER: How has the Land-Use Plan been received by local government?

RG: It may be too much to ask a legislator or some other decision-maker to absorb a Plan like this and really grasp its meaning. It's a very comprehensive document and it's physically overwhelming in some respects -- 270 pages. And yet, I don't think I've ever seen a Plan -- and we went out of our way to do this -- that attempted to cover all of the subjects in as brief a fashion and in as graphically interesting a fashion. The decision-makers are beginning to understand what it's all about and they, along with others, are promoting changes and programs that are recommended by the Land-Use Plan.

ER: Can you tell us about a few specific programs that exemplify the Snyder concept of living and working for and in one's place?

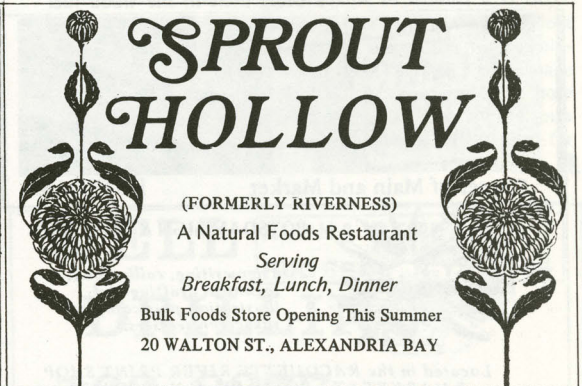
RG: On the energy issue we're working to see industrial parks fueled with wood chips and we'd like to see municipal waste converted into an usable energy source. Our whole premise is to maximize resource recovery and minimize consumption of resources. We're working on some local projects in resource recovery: composting, source separation, housing rehabilitation. (The only two housing types in the county that have shown an increase are mobil homes and subsidized public housing and they're the least beneficial to the community. This is going on while the basic housing stock of the county is deteriorating.)

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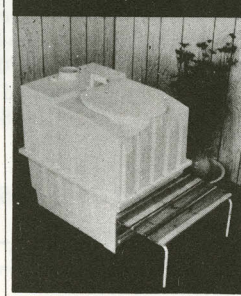
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around to realize this obsession with consumption is catching up with us and people are supporting our resource recovery proposals. In 1979, instead of allowing things like the Horizon Project to destroy an important forest resource area, people are coming to see what the potential is for a wood-fuel economy up here and to understand the importance of our forest resources as a long-term, sustainable energy supply for industry, commerce and the people of the county. Hopefully people are coming to understand the insanity of hacking up 25,000 acres of Adirondack wilderness into cookie-cutter lots to sell through the mail to people in San Diego. I don't know. We still have to deal with that stupidity sometimes.

ER: We've talked about the overall diversity of this county. It is, however, very much an agricultural county. In recent years we've seen small farms become defunct or get swallowed up by larger operations. The small farm seems unable to survive because of conditions and regulations imposed from outside of the county. On one hand, there are requirements like the bulk tank and the newer concept of manure treatment facilities. On the other hand, small farm diversity, and survival, is severely limited by the inability to distribute farm produce locally. Throughout the country, rural as well as urban outlets are supplied by a central distributor that will have nothing to do with the small, local farm (and this goes back to the MacDonald's-chain-store syndrome). Is there any way that the county can reverse these trends which are primarily imposed from outside the community itself?

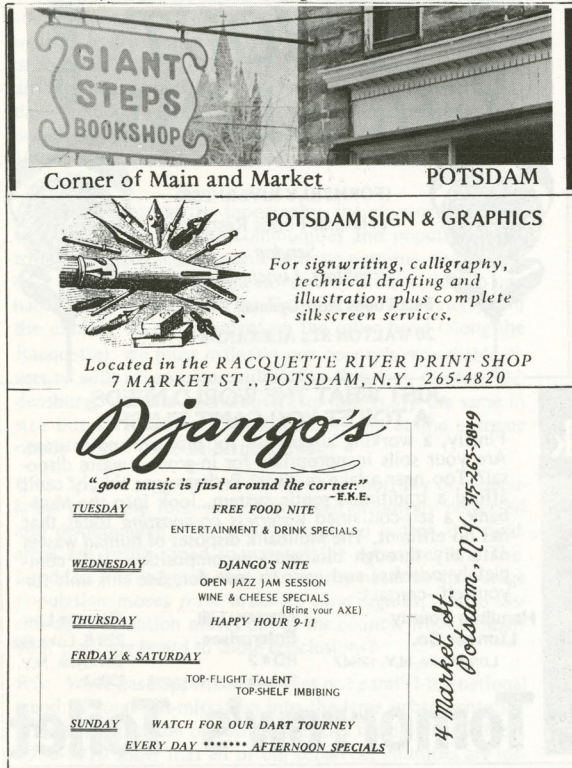
RG: We are trying to get funds, through a Federal Act passed a few years ago, to hire a farm marketing specialist. This is a parallel of what's being done in the wood fuel

field. A forest marketing specialist has been brought in to promote a wood fuel economy. By promote, I mean actually develop markets for a wood fuel economy. We want to do the same thing with agriculture, to get a specialist to improve -- no, not improve, actually create -- local markets. A specialist would really attempt to create both local markets for local farm products and create outside markets for export.

There are indications that agriculture is getting more diversified locally. For example, the beef industry has grown considerably in the past decade. It is becoming economically sensible to diversify even without any push or assistance from government. In the wood fuel field we've seen an example of this with everyone buying wood stoves, simply because of the economic sense of it.

For agriculture, as with wood fuel for industry, we'd like to think on a larger scale, in terms of things that would have a genuine impact on the area's economy. One possibility would be to really go into competition with the chain supermarkets. If the supermarkets won't take the local produce, then let's outcompete them in the marketplace. We may talk to the County Economic Development Office and other agencies about financing the construction of a permanent, year-round market -- including frozen food counters and storage facilities -- where the consumer can do the weekly food shopping and buy locally on a year-round basis. This does not involve a lot of money but it would promote local farm products and thereby local diversity and local economic health.

There may also be legislative ways to promote local consumption of local produce: suppose we had legislation that required government agencies and institutions to buy



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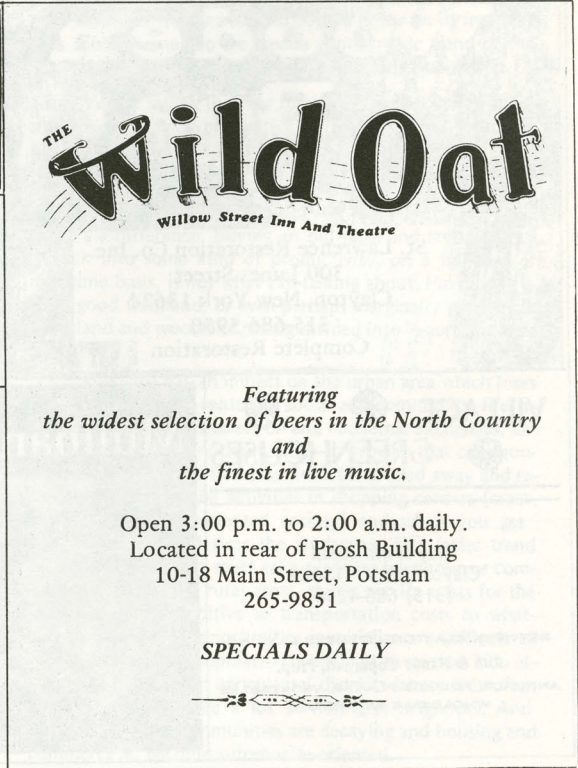
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local goods. Right here in this county we have two large state colleges and a large state hospital which could contract with local farmers to buy a certain amount of corn, tomatoes, and other produce. I think you'd see a lot of farmers diversify and take advantage of those markets. It's the same with wood-fuel; we must develop that initial market. The economics just aren't there now. We need something that can push us over the hurdle to really create a wood-fuel market so that logging companies will maintain forests and use forests as a long-range resource. And agricultural diversification requires a well-developed local marketing system. All this relates to diversity: improving the local economy by enhancing and protecting diversity.

We can start providing for ourselves locally and enhancing our own economy rather than buying homes that are factory built in Michigan and hauled here by rail, food that is produced in California and hauled here by truck, or energy that is produced in the Middle East and hauled here by super-tanker. Anybody should be able to see that we would be better off locally, and in the state as a whole, if we got away from that kind of economy.

ER: Gary Snyder's essay ends with a reference to Wendell Berry's essay, *The Unsettling of America*. Snyder paraphrases Berry...he points out that the way the economic system works now, you're penalized if you try to stay in one spot and do anything well. It's not just that the integrity of Native American land is threatened, or National Forests and Parks; it's all land that's under the gun...The economics of it works so that anyone who jumps at the chance for quick profit is rewarded -- doing proper agriculture means *not* to jump at the most profitable chance -- proper forest management or game management means doing things with the far future in mind -- and the future is unable to pay us for it right now. Doing things right means living as though your grandchildren would also be alive, in this land, carrying on the work we're doing right now, with deepening delight.' Do you have any final comments or personal reactions to that quote?

RG: I relate to that quote in a very personal context because I feel I have been penalized for sticking with St. Lawrence County and the completion of the Land-Use Plan. Periodically my job has been threatened and the planning office has been kept on a shoe-string budget. The power structure of this county has done its best to prevent sound thinking on decision-making; there hasn't been any sort of design, any rationale for making decisions. They have been made here, as elsewhere, on the politics of the moment -- but planning doesn't have anything to do with the politics of the moment, so a planner who is doing his job is not very politically acceptable. While it may be expedient today to tear down the Potsdam Depot, or carve up 25,000 acres of Adirondack wilderness, or build a high-voltage powerline which slashes across the county, the long-term implications (and, in some cases, the short-term implications as well) suggest that these are really crazy policies and not in our best interest.

On the positive side, if there's anything to be hopeful about for this county, it's the rather dramatic turn-around in attitude towards the Planning Board and the Land-Use Plan. The legislature found it couldn't quite close us down so they gave us a starvation diet. But this changed and there is a new attitude to use us to our full potential -- local government has now given us new offices and facilities, staff, and appointments on the Planning Board. Best of all, perhaps, is that our relationship with the County Legislature is beginning to be based on the Land-Use Plan; the Plan is the foundation for everything we're doing now. Government should have a plan. Private industry has a plan; every corporation in this country has a plan with major efforts going into planning and development.

Almost the first words in the Plan ask, why make a plan if it's only advisory? It's a foundation for comprehensive decision-making. When there's a choice to be made we have a long-range reference point, a context to put those choices into, an overall context of what's good for the county's economy and it's social well-being -- what's good for this place.

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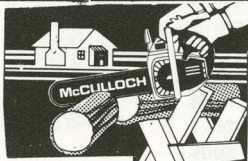
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